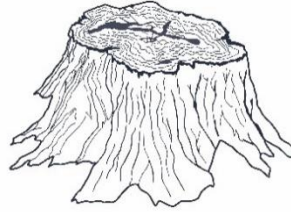


# CUT CARBON NOT FORESTS



## Parliamentary Briefing UK Biomass Sustainability Criteria Fail to Protect Forests and Biodiversity

Troubling new evidence underscores that the UK's sustainability criteria for biomass sourcing are not fit for purpose. As reported on 5 July 2021 by Channel 4 News, investigators exposed how wood from a clearcut of an old and biodiverse Estonian forest not only ended up burned at Drax Power Station but was certified as "sustainable."<sup>i</sup> On 9 July 2021 CNN reported how the operations of a company called Enviva, the largest wood pellet manufacturer in the world and a top supplier of biomass to Drax, were harming marginalized communities of colour in the U.S. South and perpetuating decades of environmental racism.<sup>ii</sup> Additionally, after years of misleading claims about sourcing only "wastes and residues," CNN described how Enviva took *one-quarter* of the trees from a clearcut of a *one hundred year old* wetland forest to turn into wood pellets at its pellet mill in Northampton, North Carolina, which supplies Drax.<sup>iii</sup>

Together with years of independent, on-the-ground investigations into UK wood sourcing from clearcuts of rare and ecologically sensitive forests in North America and Europe, **the pattern is clear: the UK's "sustainable sourcing" standards fail to protect forests and biodiversity and should no longer be used to legitimise billions in biomass electricity subsidies.**

No European country spends more to subsidise biomass-burning for electricity than the UK. In 2019, the UK spent more than £1.9 billion on bioenergy subsidies, primarily to burn wood imported from overseas forests at Drax. One in every five pounds spent on renewables subsidies in 2018 went to biomass energy rather than to wind or solar, which guarantee emission cuts at a fraction of the cost.

The UK's biomass program relies on "sustainability criteria" for sourcing wood that's burned as fuel in power stations. Despite controversy about the impacts of biomass-burning on the climate and nature, the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) has for years clung to a single message: that the UK "only supports biomass which complies with strict sustainability criteria, and companies only receive a subsidy for compliant biomass." Further, BEIS claims those standards ensure that the carbon stock of the forest from which the pellets are derived is not decreased, require that biomass fuels are sourced from forest waste wood and residues, and that forest owners adhere to legal requirements to protect biodiversity and the environment.<sup>iv</sup>

**These statements have been shown to be misleading – or outright false.<sup>v</sup>**

Biomass burned for UK electricity comes overwhelmingly from overseas forests, and over half is from logging of whole trees.<sup>vi</sup> In key supply regions, such as the U.S. Southeast, the Baltics, and Canada, trees harvested to supply the UK energy market are routinely sourced using damaging logging practices,

including clear-felling of mature and highly biodiverse forests.<sup>vii</sup> This biomass is known to be high carbon and its sourcing contributes to forest degradation, yet it is accredited as meeting UK sustainability criteria.

Further, calling biomass “sustainable” does not mean that it helps reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions within timeframes relevant to climate action under the Paris Agreement. The UK’s sustainability criteria contain critical gaps in carbon accounting for foregone sequestration (i.e., the loss of carbon sequestration in the forest after it is logged), and thus inappropriately ignore all CO<sub>2</sub> emitted at the smokestack when biomass is burned as a replacement for fossil fuel. This is despite the fact that biomass-burning power stations emit more CO<sub>2</sub> than coal plants to generate the same amount of power: in 2020, Drax reported that it emitted over 13 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> from burning what it calls “sustainable” biomass.<sup>viii</sup>

The biomass industry also leans heavily on sustainability certifications that are in no way proxies for proper carbon accounting. The Sustainable Biomass Program (SBP), used by Drax and its supplier Enviva to certify their biomass, was created in 2013 by biomass companies to provide assurances that their wood pellets are sustainable and legally sourced. Sadly, from the start, the SBP was dominated by industry and built using a self-policing approach that has resulted in increased carbon emissions, accelerated loss of natural forests, and harm to local communities.<sup>ix</sup> Even programmes considered rigorous, such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), do not include a carbon accounting mechanism. Moreover, as spotlighted by Channel 4 News, clearcuts of mature and biodiverse Estonian forests were certified by the FSC as “sustainable” and ultimately supplied wood to Drax.

Finally, the biomass industry assures policymakers that the wood it burns is “waste wood,” “low grade,” or otherwise “unmerchantable.” But while forestry industry terms, such as “thinnings” and “low-grade roundwood,” may make sense in the context of forest products like lumber, pulp and paper, and plywood, they were never intended to imply *anything whatsoever* about the carbon emissions or biodiversity loss associated with burning wood for energy. What is a “waste,” “residue,” or otherwise “low-value” wood in traditional forest product markets still emits CO<sub>2</sub> when burned in a power station. Further, terms like “thinnings” and “low grade roundwood” are simply industry jargon for **trees**.

**The Government can no longer rely on talking points about the strictness of its biomass sustainability criteria while ignoring first-hand evidence from around the world about the harm UK biomass subsidies are causing to communities and forests. In light of the Channel 4 News and CNN investigations, and other evidence brought before it, BEIS must initiate an immediate investigation into the growing problem of the UK’s overseas biomass supply chains. This is relevant to the biomass burned at Drax and Lynemouth power stations, as well as MGT Teesside, anticipated to begin burning imported biomass in August 2021. Wherever possible, the Government must redirect biomass subsidies to wind, solar and tidal energy, while committing to protect, restore and expand forests and other natural ecosystems.**

This briefing was prepared by a group of environmental NGOs working to end biomass electricity subsidies in the UK. Our members are Biofuelwatch, Dogwood Alliance, NRDC, the Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC), and Stand.earth. For more information or to speak to the coalition please contact [ccnf@cutcarbonnotforests.org](mailto:ccnf@cutcarbonnotforests.org).

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<sup>i</sup> Channel 4 News, “Fears biomass green revolution could be fuelling habitat loss,” 5 July 2021, <https://www.channel4.com/news/fears-biomass-green-revolution-could-be-fuelling-habitat-loss>

<sup>ii</sup> Majlie de Puy Kamp, CNN, “How marginalized communities in the South are paying the price for ‘green energy’ in Europe,” July 9 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2021/07/us/american-south-biomass-energy-invs/>

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- <sup>iii</sup> CNN, “‘It’s like we don’t matter’: Green energy loophole has devastating impact on community, July 9 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2021/07/07/american-south-biomass-energy-mg-dp-nws-orig.cnn>
- <sup>iv</sup> UK Parliament, Question for Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, tables on 8 June 2021, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-06-08/12071>
- <sup>v</sup> Fact Check of letter from the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy to Tommy Sheppard MP, 25, November 2020, <https://www.cutcarbonnotforests.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CCNF-BEIS-Fact-Check-Document.pdf>
- <sup>vi</sup> Drax Group plc Annual report and accounts 2020, see table titled, Drax Power Station biomass pellet feedstock sources in 2020, pg. 54. [https://www.drax.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Drax\\_AR2020.pdf](https://www.drax.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Drax_AR2020.pdf)
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- <sup>viii</sup> Drax Group plc, Annual Reports and Accounts 2020, [https://www.drax.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Drax\\_AR2020.pdf](https://www.drax.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Drax_AR2020.pdf).
- <sup>ix</sup> “The Sustainable Biomass Program: Smokescreen for Forest Destruction and Corporate Non-Accountability,” NRDC, Dogwood Alliance, June 2017, <https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/sustainable-biomass-program-partnership-project-ip.pdf>